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Sacred Journeys: C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VI

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Sixth

FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Sacred Journeys

C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner

Victoria S. Allen

Abstract:

C. S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner are among the finest Christian writers of the 20th century. Both authors have published fiction and non-fiction, fantasy, theology, literary criticism and apologetics. What they have most in common, however, is their conversion to Christ as young men, conversions which led to their vocations as Christian writers with far reaching influence. Many of their spiritual insights are reflected in their personal narratives of conversion, for, as Buechner insists, "At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography."

To compare conversions is one thing; to compare conversion *narratives* is another. A close analysis of Lewis's autobiography *Surprised by Joy* (1955) and Buechner's first memoir *The Sacred Journey* (1983) reveals similarities (and differences) in the backgrounds of the authors and their experiences and expressions of faith.

Sacred Journeys: C.S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner

Dr. Victoria S. Allen

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) and Frederick Buechner (b. 1926) never actually met, but they can be considered “friends” because as 20th-century authors and scholars writing from a Christian perspective, their writings and spiritual journeys have so much in common. Both writers are known for their diverse literary expressions of faith, whether through creative fiction, non-fiction, apologetics, literary criticism, or sermons. Both writers are known for their vivid imaginations, humor and phenomenal ability to put into words the truths of spiritual experience. Both have gained a large following in Christian and non-Christian circles, and are often quoted from the pulpit and by other writers.

Indeed their lives are similar in remarkable ways. They were both converted to Christianity as young adults while pursuing careers as scholars and writers, and both have written conversion narratives which have become classics. How they tell their stories reflects their views of themselves and God. It also reflects their culture, audience and time in which they wrote.

Introducing his conversion narrative *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* published in 1955, Lewis’s preface reveals certain assumptions. Lewis begins, “This book is written partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity” (vii). From the first sentence, the focus is on a change in philosophy—a move from one logical position to another. And yet, Lewis soon mentions that the relevance of the story will depend on how well a reader can identify with his experience of “Joy”—“have *you* felt that too?” In other words, it is also based on personal emotional or intuitive experience.

The second paragraph begins, “The book aims at telling the story of my conversion and is not a general autobiography, still less ‘Confessions’ like those of St. Augustine or Rousseau” (vii). Here Lewis explains that in the early chapters the “net is spread pretty wide in order that, when the explicitly spiritual crisis arrives, the reader may understand what sort of person my childhood and adolescence had made me” (vii-viii). Buechner too will closely examine the environmental factors which shaped his receptivity to God, but his net is selective—he focuses on the spiritual signposts on his journey.

Another significant difference between the two occurs in Lewis’s last paragraph of his preface:

The story is, I fear, suffocatingly subjective; the kind of thing I have never written before and shall probably never write again. I have tried so to write the first chapter that those who can’t bear such a story will see at once what they are in for and close the book with the least waste of time. (viii)

Lewis’s disclaimer implies that something “suffocatingly subjective” is somehow less valuable than something that is “objectively true.” He seems almost embarrassed at the

introspection involved, and he adds it is the kind of thing “I have never written before and shall probably never write again.”

In contrast, Buechner begins *The Alphabet of Grace* (1970), his first autobiographical journal, with the statement, “At its heart most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography” (3). When Buechner received an invitation to give The William Belden Noble Lectures at Harvard in 1969, he asked for clarification on the topic of the lectures. In his second memoir *Now and Then*, Buechner relates the answer he received:

Perhaps something in the area of “religion and letters,” he wrote back, and it was the word *letters* that did it. What he meant by the word was clear enough, but suddenly I found myself thinking of letters literally instead—of letters as the alphabet itself, the A’s, B’s, C’s and D’s out of which all literature, all words, are ultimately composed. And from there I wandered somehow to the notion of the events of our lives—even, and perhaps especially, the most everyday events—as the alphabet through which God, of his grace, spells out his words, his meaning to us. So *The Alphabet of Grace* was the title I hit upon, and what I set out to do was to try to describe a single representative day of my life in a way to suggest what there was of God to hear in it . . . In writing those lectures and the book they later turned into, it came to seem to me that if I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace. What I started trying to do as a writer and as a preacher was more and more to draw on my own experience not just as a source of plot, character, illustration, but as a source of truth. (NT 86-87)

In his conversion narrative *The Sacred Journey* (1982), Buechner listens to his early life for the sounds of God’s voice. This memoir came out of his own psychotherapy and was written twenty years after his conversion. In his third memoir *Telling Secrets* (1991), Buechner reveals that writing his first two memoirs during a difficult period when he feared for his daughter’s life, he came to recognize the presence of God from his earliest years.

I got so caught up in my daughter’s slow starvation that I wasn’t aware of the extent to which I myself was starving. . . . It was at this time that I wrote two short autobiographical volumes called *The Sacred Journey* in 1982 and *Now and Then* in 1983, and they helped to let a little light and air into the dark place where I was imprisoned. They gave me more of a sense than I had ever had before of how as far back as I could remember things had been stirring in my life that I was all but totally unaware of at the time . . . I found myself remembering small events as far back as early childhood which were even then leading me in something

like that direction, but so subtly and almost imperceptibly that it wasn't until decades had passed that I saw them for what they were . . . The events were often so small that I was surprised to remember them, yet they turned out to have been road markers on a journey I didn't even know I was taking. (TS 47-48)

Thus Buechner's conversion narrative is based on his retrospective understanding of the ways God was calling him to Himself. He tells his readers they too are on a sacred journey:

What each of them [events of our lives] might be thought to mean separately is less important than what they all mean together. At the very least they mean this: mean *listen*. Listen. Your life is happening. . . . A journey, years long, has brought each of you through thick and thin to this moment in time as mine has also brought me. Think back on that journey. Listen back to the sounds and sweet airs of your journey that give delight and hurt not and to those too that give no delight at all and hurt like Hell. *Be not affeard*. The music of your life is subtle and elusive and like no other--not a song with words but a song without words, a singing, clattering music to gladden the heart or turn the heart to stone, to haunt you perhaps with echoes of a vaster, farther music of which it is part.

The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak--even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys. We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned to pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music. Sometimes we avoid listening for fear of what we may hear; sometimes for fear that we may hear nothing at all but the empty rattle of our own feet on the pavement. But be not affeard says Caliban, nor is he the only one to say it. "Be not afraid," says another, "for lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him. (*Sacred Journey* 77-78)

Interwoven into the Buechnerian style is the natural integration of scripture and quotes from Shakespeare. Words of Caliban from *The Tempest* exemplify Buechner's technique of showing literature as a way to get at essentials. This appreciation of literature as a vehicle for listening to life parallels his view of psychotherapy and the scriptures --they increase our perception of God's grace being played out in our experience. The events of his life which Buechner chooses to highlight in *The Sacred Journey* illustrate how God is often present long before we recognize Him.

In contrast, in his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis seems to focus on the intellectual content of his belief system to explain his philosophical shift. Lewis states, "This book is written partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity and partly to correct one or two false notions that seem to have got about." (vii). Logically and with systematic detail, Lewis recounts changes from an active imagination and childhood acceptance of church teaching to adolescent rebellion against authority and religious conformity to atheism, then theism and finally acceptance of Christianity. Most of the account is seen through a philosophical lens through which he examines his thinking or belief at a particular time (interspersed with flashes of imagination which may have reflected spiritual reality but were not that reality itself). However, as he nears his conversion, he weaves into his narrative an increasing awareness of divine intervention which parallels Buechner's concept of listening "for the sound of him [God]." So, given the sovereignty of God, what were the signposts of God's hidden agenda on their sacred journeys?

Like Lewis, reading imaginary fiction was a major preoccupation of Buechner's childhood. He recalls that as a boy during a year of sickness, "I lived a year in Oz (1932) and have been homesick for it ever since" (*Clown in the Belfry* 28). As he became immersed in the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, the world of Oz became more real than the world outside his bedroom. In *The Sacred Journey* Buechner describes his fascination with the Land of Oz where animals talk and no one dies. Buechner was particularly drawn to a character named King Rinkitink, who eventually evolved into the hero of many of Buechner's novels. This king was plumb and ebullient, foolish and vulnerable, but even in his weakness he demonstrated tremendous wisdom and strength. Buechner describes him as later turning up in unexpected places, such as in G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, where according to Buechner "he appears as the character of Sunday . . . that billowing, zany powerhouse of a man, [who] reveals his true identity finally by saying, 'I am the Sabbath. I am the Peace of God'" (SJ 18).

Reflecting on his experience, Buechner explains why his boyhood reading was so significant:

Nothing was more remote from my thought at this period than theological speculation . . . but certain patterns were set, certain rooms were made ready, so that when, years later, I came upon Saint Paul for the first time and heard him say, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are," I had the feeling that I knew something of what he was talking about. Something of the divine comedy that we are all of us involved in. Something of grace. (SJ 18)

As a child Lewis too was a devout reader of myths and legends and even created his own fictional kingdom, Animal-Land, filled with talking animals. He recalls "at the age of six, seven, and eight—I was living almost entirely in my imagination; or at least that the imaginative experience of those years now seems to me more important than anything else" (*Surprised by Joy* 15). Similar to Buechner's observation, Lewis comments that his infatuation with Norse and Celtic mythology as an adolescent

probably prepared him “to acquire some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself “ (*Surprised by Joy* 77).

Another major similarity in the childhood of the two writers was the loss of a parent. When he was 9, Lewis’s mother died of cancer. In 1936 when Buechner was 10, his father committed suicide. So significant was this event that in his memoir Buechner divides his life into before and after the event. Before is “once below a time” – childhood’s timeless present, Eden before the fall; and after it is “once upon a time” when measurable time began. For both boys, this parental loss proved to be a turning point—when childhood innocence ended, and the uncertainty of life began. Lewis recalls “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life” (*Surprised by Joy* 21). Although Lewis felt her loss deeply, the family did not discuss their grief and his father soon shipped him off to boarding school. In Buechner’s home, his father’s suicide became a family secret, something one did not mention. There was no funeral for his father, and his immediate family did not attend the memorial held for his father the following fall. Buechner describes this experience of losing his father as something he did not consciously grieve at the time, but which he came to realize shook the very ground of his existence.

For twenty years Buechner unconsciously wove his father’s suicide into his novels. After being in therapy, he wrote his memoirs partly to discover how God was nevertheless with him through his father’s loss, but also to illustrate how important it is to talk about a painful experience. As a way to listen to life, in therapy Buechner discovered the importance of remembering. In a short novel *The Wizard’s Tide* (republished under the title *The Christmas Tide*), Buechner refashions his family’s reaction to his father’s death, rewriting it as it should have been-- a time for the family to openly share their grief to bring acceptance and healing. In many of his writings Buechner stresses the importance of memory:

We cannot undo our old mistakes or their consequences any more than we can erase old wounds that we have both suffered and inflicted, but through the power that memory gives us of thinking, feeling, imagining our way back through time we can at long last finally finish with the past in the sense of removing the power to hurt us and other people and to stunt our growth as human beings It is through memory that we are able to reclaim much of our lives that we have long since written off by finding that in everything that has happened to us over the years God was offering us possibilities of new life and healing which, though we may have missed them at the time, we can still choose and be brought to life by and healed by all these years later.

Another way of saying it, perhaps, is that memory makes it possible for us both to bless the past, even those parts of it that we have always felt cursed by, and also to be blessed by it. If this kind of remembering sounds like what psychotherapy is all about, it is because of course it is, but I think it is also what the forgiveness of sins is all about—the interplay of God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of God and each other. (TS 32-33)

As writers, both Lewis and Buechner reveal the pain of familial loss in their books. For Lewis the ripples extend to Digory in *The Magician's Nephew* who wishes more than anything to help his mother live, is tempted to wrong, but through obedience succeeds. Later Lewis writes *A Grief Observed* after the death of his wife using a pseudo name. For Buechner, a more unconscious mechanism is at work—in each of his early novels, a suicide occurs before or during the narrative, which the characters seek to work through. In some of his later novels such as *Godric*, the longing for a father is a major theme. As Buechner was later to learn, although death had ended his father's life, it had not ended his relationship with his father which would need prayer, therapy, and writing a novel about Godric, a medieval saint, to heal.

During adolescence, both Lewis and Buechner were drawn to 16th and 17th century English writers, many of whom wrote from a Christian perspective. Like C. S. Lewis, Buechner was sent to boarding school, but for him it was a positive experience. Although he was dreadfully homesick the first year, he adapted to the academic challenges of Lawrenceville, an all boys preparatory school. There Buechner found life long friends, such as James Merrill, and inspiring English teachers. By the age of 15 he knew he wanted to become a writer.

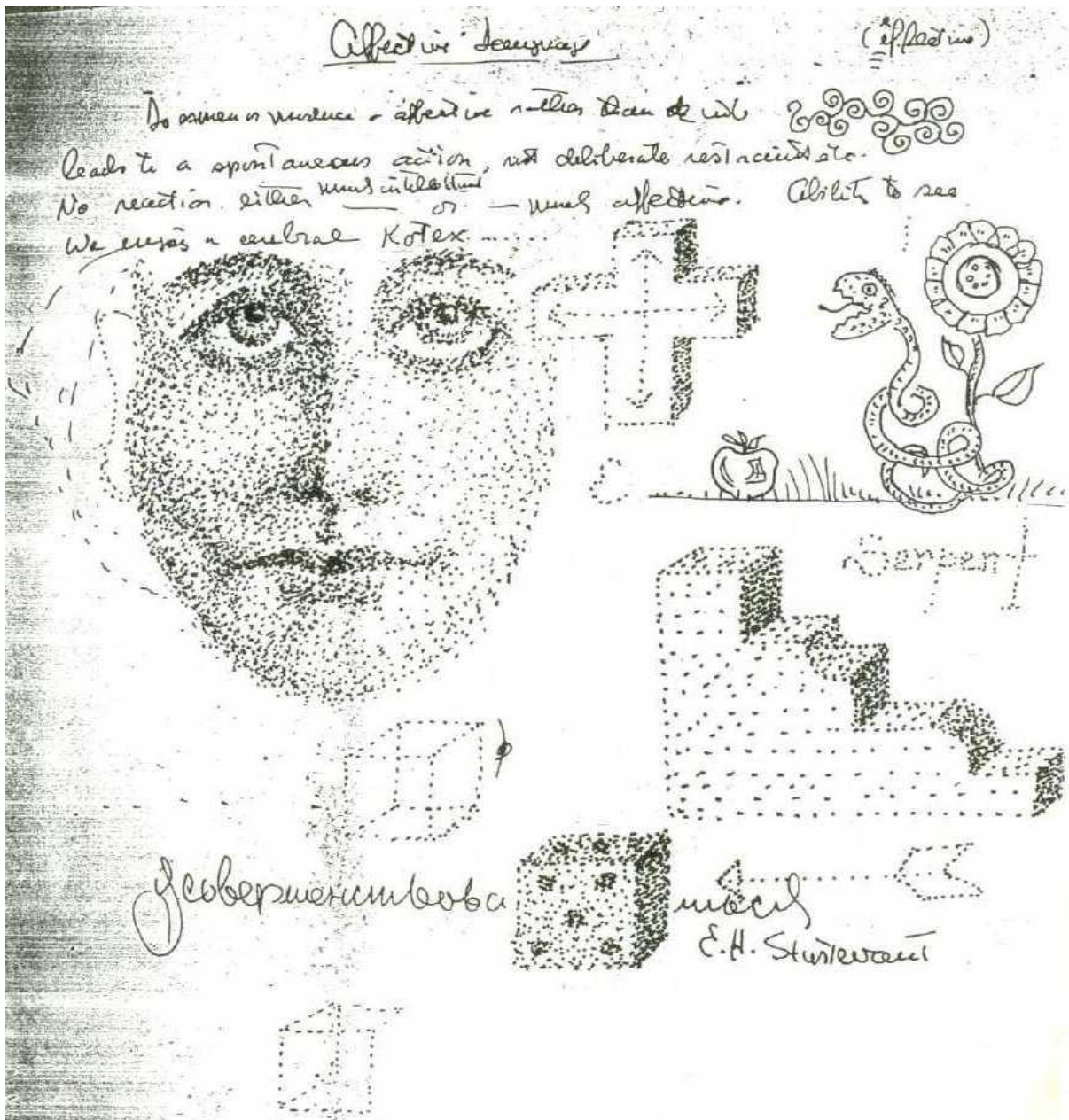
In the final section of *Sacred Journey* called "Beyond Time", Buechner relates his experience at Princeton, where he was an English major studying British and American literature. He explains:

Beyond time is the phrase I have used to describe this leg of my journey because it was then that I think I first began to have a pale version of the experience that Saint Paul describes in his letter to the Philippians. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," he writes, "for God is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." . . . it seems to me now that a power from beyond time was working to achieve its own aim through my aimless life in time as it works through the lives of all of us and all our times.

Starting to write my first novel was part of it too, as have been all the novels I have written since, because what I developed through the writing of them was a sense of plot and, beyond that, a sense that perhaps life itself has a plot. . . In any case, Tristram Bone, the hero of that earliest novel, appears on the first page seated in a barber chair facing the mirror in a white sheet that hangs from his shoulders like a robe. "The mirror reflected what seemed at first a priest," is the way the book begins, and insofar as what the mirror also reflected was an image, albeit an unconscious one, of myself, I cannot help thinking of that opening sentence as itself just such a whisper, as the first faint intimation from God knows where of the direction my life was even then starting to take me, although if anyone had said so at the time, I would have thought he was mad. (SJ 95-6).

In the Wheaton archives I came across Buechner's Princeton notebooks. Although Buechner was an excellent student, on occasion his mind wandered, and the artist in Buechner emerged. Doodles from his Princeton class notes paint a vivid picture

of the atmosphere of the classroom, where Professor R.P. Blackmur shared the New Criticism and Buechner expressed his literary skills to the acclaim of his professors. For Buechner, though not religious, glimmerings of spirituality are revealed in his doodles. Pictures of stairways, a cross, a serpent, a die of chance, are randomly juxtaposed with the class notes about the Cerebral Cortex (spelled Kortex). And in the midst is a large pointillist face, with eyes raised—icon like. Perhaps a saint? Perhaps a self-portrait? When seen next to photographs of Buechner in his twenties, there is a striking similarity.



Doodles from Frederick Buechner's Princeton Notebooks

Buechner Collection, Buswell Memorial Library, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL

Both men were at times deeply touched by what Lewis calls “Joy”, a sense of being overwhelmed by beauty, “Milton’s ‘enormous bliss’ of Eden”. Lewis recounts three such experiences, brought about through memory, nature and poetry. Buechner also recalls certain transcendent moments, in which time was suspended. Lewis juxtaposes descriptions of these emotional experiences with rational observations which critique them. Throughout *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis stresses the progress of his thought. He directly addresses the reader, “And now notice my blindness. At that very moment there arose the memory of a place and time at which I had tasted the lost Joy with unusual fullness” (166) “I do not think the resemblance between the Christian and the merely imaginative experience is accidental. I think that all things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, the imagination not least” (167). Lewis found himself pulled in two directions: “Such was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. . . . On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow ‘rationalism.’ Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless” (170). Thus he concludes:

Such, then, was my position: to care for almost nothing but the gods and heroes, the garden of the Hesperides, Launcelot and the Grail, and to believe in nothing but atoms and evolution and military service Nor do I believe that the intermittent wavering in my materialistic “faith” . . . which set in toward the end of the Bookham period would ever have arisen simply from my wishes. It came from another source. (174)

Here Lewis goes on to explain the significance of his reading Yeats, a writer who not only imagined but actually believed in the supernatural world.

As the narrative *Surprised by Joy* moves closer to his conversion, Lewis increasingly acknowledges God’s sovereign direction leading his sacred journey. First he writes of purchasing *Phantastes, a faerie Romance* by George MacDonald and how in reading it, the holiness, the shadow of Joy overcame all the common things in its bright shadow. And he clearly notes the source of this enlightenment: “in the then invincible ignorance of my intellect, all this was given me without asking, even without consent. That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized” (181). While in the hospital he thoroughly enjoyed reading Chesterton’s essays which in the past he would have disliked. Lewis comments, “It would almost seem that Providence, or some ‘second cause’ of a very obscure kind, quite overrules our previous tastes when it decides to bring two minds together (190).

Back in Oxford as a student, debates with his good friends, such as Owen Barfield, bring his thoughts closer in line with a theistic viewpoint, as if in a contest of philosophies, whatever makes the most sense wins. But here Lewis’s language changes and one senses that God was pursuing him as he states, “I was suddenly impelled I had simply been ordered—or, rather, compelled” and Lewis readily admits, “And so the great Angler played His fish and I never dreamed that the hook was in my tongue” (211). In the chapter “Checkmate”, Lewis uses the analogy of a contest of two chess players, seen at first as his own philosophy vs. that of his Christian friends. But in reality it becomes apparent that Lewis’s opponent is God. Not only the views of his friends but the books he was reading “were beginning to turn against me. Indeed, I must have been

as blind as a bat not to have seen, long before, the ludicrous contradiction between my theory of life and my actual experiences as a reader” (213). Like Buechner, his reading in English literature the *Dream of the Rood*, Langland, Donne and George Herbert reinforces this dichotomy. Then he is drawn to Professors Dyson and Tolkien, Christian believers in the English department. Again using the analogy of the chess match Lewis states, “All over the board my pieces were in the most disadvantageous positions. Soon I could no longer cherish even the illusion that the initiative lay with me. My Adversary began to make His final moves” (216).

Lewis then recounts a turning point. “The odd thing was that before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice.” (224) Here Lewis describes his choice to open the door or keep it shut. He then adds, “I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say, “I chose” yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite” (224). Next he describes his sense of being pursued

night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. (228-9)

This conversion was to God; belief in Christ came a year later. But for Lewis, the theistic conversion was the biggest hurdle.

Part of Lewis’s focus on his stages of thought is based on his carefully kept diary with its “fussy attentiveness which I had so long paid to the progress of my own opinions and the states of my own mind. For many healthy extroverts self-examination first begins with conversion. For me it was almost the other way around. . .” (233). As Lewis comes to know God, he puts less focus on himself. Interestingly, this is opposite to Buechner’s approach, since for him listening to one’s life is the key to knowing God, both before and after conversion.

Once Lewis became a theist, he said the question of becoming a Christian was not so much based on finding the one true faith, but rather, “Where has religion reached its true maturity? Where, if anywhere have the hints of all Paganism been fulfilled?” (235). Yet for Lewis, the final step of believing in Christ, came not as an intellectual debate. Rather it came as an intuition, an awareness that he cannot explain.

When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. . . . It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake. And it was, like that moment on top of the bus, ambiguous. Freedom, or necessity? . . . As for what we commonly call Will, and what we commonly call Emotion, I fancy these usually talk too loud, protest too much, to be quite believed, and we have a secret suspicion that the great passion or the iron resolution is partly a put-up job. (237).

In summary, Lewis looks at the road to his conversion from the perspective of the intellectual steps he took, the philosophical views he accepted. But as he nears his conversion, the focus changes. Even as he lists his developing mental arguments, Lewis sees through them to a sovereign God using these events to draw him to Himself and his final acceptance of Jesus Christ is a calm awareness “like a man who . . . becomes aware that he is awake.” It is just something one knows, not something that can be explained. Like Buechner, then, Lewis listens back on his sacred journey for the sounds and sweet airs of the One who has been leading him on the way.

Lewis struggles with intellectual debate, until as a reluctant convert he finally surrenders, and the rest simply falls into place. Buechner’s conversion seems to come from out of the blue—it is unexpected and dramatic. Like Lewis, it is only afterwards that he can look back and see the ways he was being prepared. After five years teaching English at his high school alma mater Lawrenceville Academy, Buechner moved to New York City to write full time. He started attending a Presbyterian church near his apartment where Sunday after Sunday he listened to sermons preached by George Buttrick. As Buechner recounts:

What drew me . . . was whatever it was that his sermons came from and whatever it was in me that they touched so deeply. And then there came one particular sermon . . . Jesus Christ refused the crown that Satan offered him in the wilderness, Buttrick said, but he is king nonetheless because again and again he is crowned in the heart of the people who believe in him. And that inward coronation takes place, Buttrick said, “among confession, and tears, and great laughter.” It was the phrase *great laughter* that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hiddenly in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon. . . .that what I found finally was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seem to matter which. There are other words for describing what happened to me—psychological words, historical words, poetic words—but in honesty as well as in faith I am reduced to the word that is his name because no other seems to account for the experience so fully. (*Sacred Journey* 109-111)

“Surprised by joy” could well be a phrase used to describe Buechner’s conversion that Sunday. The following week, Buechner made an appointment with Buttrick to learn more about what had apparently happened and by the following year Buechner was enrolled in Union Seminary where his formal theological education began in earnest. Buechner’s second memoir *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation* recounts his seminary years and ordination as a “evangelist/apologist”, who sought to “defend the faith against its ‘cultured despisers’ as Chaplain at Phillips Exeter Academy. While at Exeter he delivered sermons, still in print, recently reissued by Harper and Row as *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (2006). He also published his first overtly Christian novel, *The*

Final Beast. Like Lewis's experience as a Christian at Oxford, Buechner sought to share the relevance of Christian faith in a rather hostile academic environment.

C. S. Lewis and Frederick Buechner share similar life experiences, scholarly training, and life-changing conversions which led to lives devoted to expressing a Christian world view through sermons and lectures, philosophical writings and imaginative, memorable fiction.

Still there are differences in their approaches. Whereas Lewis provides answers, Buechner suggests possibilities. Lewis is straight forward, Buechner throws a curve ball. Though "friends" they are different persons, raised in different countries, in different generations. Lewis, the Anglo-Irishman, wrote his conversion narrative in 1955, during a time when rationality, logic and the "new criticism" were dominant. By the time Buechner wrote *The Sacred Journey* in 1982 in America, unconscious realities often subverted conscious logic, and post-modern assumptions valued experience over intellectual ascent. Interestingly, C.S. Lewis' last book, *A Grief Observed*, which he published under a pseudo-name, most shares the qualities of vulnerability seen in Buechner's memoirs. Ultimately, their conversion narratives, *Surprised by Joy* and *The Sacred Journey*, are Christian classics which transcend the time and place in which they were written.

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